DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 456 259 CE 082 239

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TITLE Collaborative Approaches to Increasing the Participation and Outcomes of People with a Disability in Vocational Education and Training.
PUB DATE 2001-03-00
NOTE 8p.; In: Research to Reality: Putting VET Research To Work. Proceedings of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA) Conference (4th, Adelaide, Australia, March 28-30, 2001); see CE 082 232.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.avetra.org.au/PAPERS%202001/Harrison%20Barnett.pdf.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Action Research; Agency Cooperation; Apprenticeships; Cooperative Planning; *Disabilities; Dropout Prevention; Education Work Relationship; Educational Cooperation; Educational Research; Enrollment Influences; Financial Support; Foreign Countries; Government School Relationship; Intervention; Job Placement; Models; Participation; *Partnerships in Education; Postsecondary Education; Program Effectiveness; Program Implementation; Public Agencies; School Business Relationship; Secondary Education; *Special Needs Students; Strategic Planning; Student Placement; Student Recruitment; *Supported Employment; *Transitional Programs; *Vocational Education; Work Experience Programs
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

One strategy to increase participation in vocational education and training (VET) by Australians with a disability involves intervention at the secondary school level to reduce early school leaving by providing structured VET learning and work placement opportunities. The Enterprise Career Education Foundation's Lighthouse initiative, which was implemented in 2000 and slated for completion at the end of 2001, is funding three projects that are each designed to provide guidance on how to make structured workplace learning (SWL) accessible to students with disabilities and help them achieve positive VET outcomes. The three projects are as follows: Central Coast Business Education Network in Gosford; Launceston Workplace Learning; and Western Adelaide Vocational and Enterprise Services (WAVES). A critical feature of each project is the formation and strengthening of partnerships or working alliances between schools, registered training organizations, employers, employment agencies, and other organizations in managing disability. The WAVES project, which illustrates one application of the proposed collaborative model, will involve placing 30 students in programs combining work preparation, structured workplace learning, and job placement and support. The program will involve eight partners representing three levels of government, industry, and two disability employment services. The program will also feature school-based apprenticeships and case-based funding to agencies. (MN)

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Collaborative approaches to increasing the participation and outcomes of people with a disability in vocational education and training

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Increasing participation in VET by people with disabilities

A key concern for vocational education and training (VET) policymakers is the low participation rates in VET by people with a disability. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data indicate that 15% of the working age population are known to have a disability, yet only 3.5% participate in VET and less than 2% are apprentices or trainees. Equally low levels of participation in Structured Workplace Learning programs are evident among school students with disabilities, and these students are also characterised by high rates of early school leaving.

It follows that one strategy to increase participation in VET by people with a disability involves intervention at the secondary school level – to reduce early school leaving by providing structured VET learning and work placement opportunities. The issue has been the lack of a model of good practice to achieve this outcome. Our paper presents a model that is being trialled through an action research initiative sponsored by the Enterprise Career Education Foundation.

The model is based on collaboration within and across sectors.

The initiative

ANTA's Disability Forum: *Bridging Pathways* strategy

Until recently there has been a distinct lack of collaborative efforts between the VET and disability sectors.

People from the VET sector often feel overwhelmed by the array of services provided by the disability sector, which makes it difficult to know where to start when forming collaborative networks. Conversely, people from the disability sector find the range of programs within the VET sector confusing.

From a client perspective, a number of reports within the VET sector, and more broadly across the disability services sector, have acknowledged the difficulties faced by people with a disability in trying to coordinate and navigate these services in order to undertake a VET activity. System statistics reinforce the extent of these

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difficulties, with participation rates and outcomes achieved by people with disabilities in the VET system being significantly below those of the wider community.

In June 2000, Australia's education and training ministers made a five-year commitment to improving opportunities for people with a disability in VET. They agreed to a national strategy and blueprint called *Bridging Pathways*, which spells out a practical road ahead to achieving better outcomes. For the first time, *Bridging Pathways* describes a VET system which recognises the diverse needs of individuals, enables training providers to accommodate these needs and supports collaboration between the VET and disability sectors.

The final document developed by the taskforce has been termed a *Blueprint* because it outlines a detailed plan of action for all of the players involved. The *Blueprint* is principally designed to overcome or remove structural inequities, whether they are legislative, administrative or resourcing practices.

An implementation taskforce was established to formulate an implementation plan for *Bridging Pathways*. The taskforce included representatives from all the groups that would be instrumental in implementing a national VET strategy. A cross-sectoral approach was taken because it was realised that some solutions may be found beyond the VET sector. VET is intrinsically linked with employment, and the lives of people with a disability are intrinsically linked with their support services. It was clear that a whole-of-government approach was needed to improve education and training opportunities for people with a disability.

The real challenge for collaboration at a systems level will lie in the implementation of the *Bridging Pathways* strategy. In order to achieve the outcomes outlined in the blueprint, four Commonwealth Departments, every State and Territory Training Authority, industry, training providers and the disability sector will need to work together.

The Enterprise Career Education Foundation *Lighthouse* initiative

In the process of developing *Bridging Pathways*, the ANTA Disability Forum worked during 1999 and 2000 with the Enterprise Career Education Foundation (ECEF) - a national organisation which is funded by DETYA to provided Structured Workplace Learning (SWL). ECEF was formerly known as the ASTF - Australian Student Traineeship Foundation. A key feature of SWL programs is that they involve structured collaboration between schools, VET providers, industry and communities.

The ECEF's *Lighthouse* initiative is a project which was implemented in 2000 and is destined for completion at the end of 2001. It has funded three projects, which are each designed to provide guidance on how to make SWL accessible and on positive vocational outcomes for students with a disability.

Interest and response was significant, with 87 proposals received from all Australian states and territories. Only three projects could be selected, and these are sponsored by:

- Central Coast Business Education Network (CCBEN) in Gosford

- Launceston Workplace Learning
- Western Adelaide Vocational and Enterprise Services (WAVES).

The model applied - the WAVES project in SA

A critical feature of each project is the formation and strengthening of partnerships or working alliances between schools, RTOs, employers, employment agencies (in particular, Competitive Employment Placement and Training - CEPT - agencies) and other organisations with expertise in managing disability. The WAVES project description below illustrates one application of the model.

Project summary

Thirty students within the western cluster of schools will be involved in a structured workplace learning and job placement program.

All students participating in the project need to have completed the Centrelink Workability tables and have a score of over 50 points. This indicates that they are eligible to receive a service from Specialist Employment Providers funded by the Department of Family and Community Services (DFaCS).

Work preparation is being provided to the participating students.

- Personnel Employment is delivering the 'Employability Skills: Becoming a Worker' course in partnership with Minda Job Placement.

- State education teachers have professional development time allocated to enable observation and evaluation of the employment preparation program.

Structured workplace learning is being provided in manufacturing and retail, including:

- a Certificate I in Metals and Engineering; and

- retail training provided by Maxima Training, with support from the City of Charles Sturt.

Job placement and support is being provided by DFaCS Specialist Employment Providers, such as Personnel Employment, with assistance from the Business Enterprise Centres - Disability Recruitment Coordination Service.

Auspicing organisation

- Western Adelaide Vocational and Enterprise Services (WAVES).

Partners

- WAVES
- Business Enterprise Centres
- Department of Education, Training and Employment (State)
- Department of Family and Community Services (Federal)

- City of Charles Sturt (local government)
- Personnel Employment
- Minda Job Placement
- South Australian Centre for Manufacturing.

In examining this collaboration, it can be seen that:

- Three levels of Government are involved, with each providing direct funding and/or other resource support.

- Industry is an active participant at both the program level and in assisting with coordination.

- Two Disability Employment services have committed to the process.

Challenges and opportunities

The challenges

A major issue to be addressed by the Blueprint is that of the coordination between the disability and VET sectors in the area of learning supports. There is currently a lack of coordination across services, and many people with a disability find it difficult to access information, coordinate services and manage their personal needs as well as study demands. Responsibility for providing supports is often not clearly defined across agencies.

Other challenges to be addressed include the following:

- Students with disabilities are more likely than other students to leave school before years 11 and 12, and to be under-represented in the VET system, which significantly disadvantages their employment options.

- CEPT agencies face significant challenges in securing long term and viable employment for their clients, and have been funded in a way which discourages them building a relationship with their clients during their secondary school years.

- Employers require specific encouragement and support to offer sustainable employment to young people with disabilities.

- Articulation between school and work is a significant issue for all young people, but particularly for those with a disability, who are most likely to leave school with little understanding of the world of work.

The opportunity

Opportunity #1: Structured Workplace Learning (SWL)

Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) and VET in Schools initiatives provide significant opportunities to enhance school-to-industry articulation and to address the problem of a lack of 'cultural fit' between the two sectors.

Partnerships between schools, RTOs and employers are vital to the success of this articulation. However, to ensure equity of opportunity for students with a disability, a fourth partner is required – one with a specialised understanding of the needs of people with a disability.

CEPT or open employment placement agencies are ideally placed to become this fourth partner, but have faced significant obstacles in becoming involved at the school level.

Opportunity #2: School-based Apprenticeships

Further opportunity for accredited VET, preparation for work and pathways to long-term employment exist in relation to School-based Apprenticeships. These can provide the required award infrastructure for CBF (see below).

CEPT agencies have traditionally received funding from the Commonwealth in block form, and under the terms of the Commonwealth State Disability Agreement (CSDA), are not supported to become involved within schools because the Agreement defines this as a State responsibility.

Opportunity #3: Case-based funding to CEPT agencies

From January 2000, case-based funding (CBF) has been trialled and this will continue until June 30, 2002. CBF is outcome-based, the outcome being a minimum of eight hours work for 26 weeks or more, for people who have been assessed by Centrelink under the WAT. This work must be structured under a sanctioned industrial award. CBF will provide for five levels of support, ranging from $3000 to $15,000 per year, and these will be determined by assessment of support needs and employment barriers.

At present, CEPTs receive block funding from DFaCS. The CBF trials are intended to explore and develop an outcomes-based funding model, with planning for a transition process between block funding and this outcomes-based model. It is most likely that they will move completely to an outcomes-based model over the next few years.

Combining the challenges with the opportunity

In South Australia, with the support of ASTF funding under the Lighthouse Initiative, WAVES (Western Area Vocational Employment Services) will trial a model that combines these challenges with the opportunities presented by CBF, SWL and School-based Apprenticeships.

The model provides for CEPT agencies to undertake these key roles:

- transfer labour market knowledge to secondary school teachers via structured in-service training and a train-the-trainer strategy. This would see teachers participating in and then delivering (as RTOs) programs like the 'Certificate of Work Education' or the classroom component of 'Becoming a Worker', and becoming accredited Workplace Trainers and Assessors (Certificate IV). This would mean that teachers would develop a clear understanding of workplace

social competencies and receive a nationally recognised VET qualification to accredit this knowledge. *(The key challenge here is the need to fund Teacher Release Time. However, it is possible that ANTA funding could be sought for this purpose, given the VET outcomes involved.)*

- provide the link to employers and manage the interface between schools and industry, including working with New Apprenticeship Centres to obtain apprenticeships.
- provide individual support to students with disabilities and their families.
- act as the feedback loop between student, school and the workplace.

The CEPT role would ultimately be funded through Commonwealth outcomes-based funding (CBF), with SWL being the first component of an outcomes-based strategy, a front-end for School-based Apprenticeships.

The WAVES project will apply this strategy through these specific steps:

- Term 1 – year 10 student completes 'Becoming a Worker'.
- Term 2 – student undertakes SWL (either with Maxima or email training).
- Mid-2001 – student begins a School-based Apprenticeship.
- By the end of 2002, the student has completed or nearly completed, two years of a SBA, and is thus highly marketable. This enables the CEPT to market the student in the labour market; a relationship has been built with employers and co-workers, the student is developing informed choice about the labour market and has attained a level of work readiness and recognised qualification. The CEPT's long-term investment has a much greater chance of being rewarded through CBF than would be possible without this preparation. Given that 30% of CEPT funding is known to be spent on employment preparation, this model builds on and improves the status quo.

In the course of the ECEF Lighthouse initiative, this model will be trialled and its lessons documented.

While the model is designed specifically to meet the challenges facing students with a disability, it is highly *transferable* and holds significant promise for students who have completed SWL, assuming the required support resources are part of the overall provision. It *builds on the partnerships* which are essential to SWL and increases the likelihood of achieving *sustainable and improved outcomes* for students with a disability.

Conclusion

Patterns of school participation show that students with disabilities are more likely to leave school before years 11 and 12 – probably because of the absence of clear vocational pathways. Preventing these early leaving rates requires intervention

which provides learning opportunities, support and structured work placement experience. The model presented in this paper involves Structured Workplace Learning (based on collaborative links as described), and School-based Apprenticeships leading to employment.

The success of the model is highly dependent on collaboration and the building of alliances within the VET sector and across to the community services sector. It depends on effective working relationships between industry, education, community and disability support services. However, intersectoral boundaries can present barriers and necessitate a whole-of-government approach.

The challenge for this model will be to develop such an approach so that open employment or CEPT agencies are enabled to work with students with disabilities while they are in school, despite the existing policy impediments to this. At present, they are funded to support clients who have been assessed by Centrelink and current policy precludes school students from this assessment. Effectively, CEPTs cannot be funded immediately for working within schools. However, unless CEPTs can build a long-term relationship with school-age clients, they are less likely to achieve employment outcomes when they leave school. In doing so, they can provide significant support and expert advice to schools and employers and are an integral part of the collaborative model.

Given new policy directions which link CEPT funding to employment outcomes, it is time to remove the barriers which currently inhibit their involvement.

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